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TAGS: PGOV PREL TU

SUBJECT: THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS: CONVERSATION WITH SOLI OZEL

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Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary. U.S.-educated, Bilgi University Professor Soli Ozel offered us a tour d'horizon of the political situation in Turkey. Like other observers we've seen over the last several weeks, Ozel expresses bitter disappointment that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) squandered political capital following their July 2007 election sweep. Instead of aggressively working the larger reform agenda - both political and economic - AKP focused on parochial issues. According to Ozel, some who saw the AKP as a liberal democratic champion in Turkey have become disillusioned and are now searching for alternatives. End summary.

OZAL'S REFORMS EMPOWERED NEW ELITE

¶12. (C) Ozel labeled as oligarchic Turkey's traditional political and economic orders. But a major disruption occurred in 1980 when Turgut Ozal, as a new undersecretary for economic affairs ("open, daring, quick-witted") under Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel, crafted and introduced extensive, market-based economic reforms into the then-statist Turkish economy. The September 12 coup that year closed a chapter on an evolving transition leading away from oligarchy toward a maturing - less controlled - order. The momentous historical events of the 1980s reached a climax for Turkey on November 9, 1989, when the Berlin Wall crumbled (basically ending the communist threat) and Turgut Ozal became the 9th president of Turkey. Soli Ozel says the (military) drafters of the 1982 constitution had assumed the Cold War would never end and the president of Turkey would always be a former military general or someone very close to the military. With communism on the wane, Turkey's strategic value to the west appeared in jeopardy - something to which the traditional, secular elite were especially sensitive. Ozal's election as president challenged that oligarchic political order just as the economic reforms initiated in 1980 undercut their control of Turkey's economy, which subsequently integrated into the world economy.

¶13. (C) Ozal's market-based economic reforms led to the rise of heretofore unknown economic power houses in Anatolia; no longer could just a few control the country's economic resources and structure. These new spheres of significant economic strength were usually pious and culturally conservative, a far cry from the traditional Turkish elite foreigners met and easily mixed with up to that time. The love/hate relationship of this traditional elite with the West, begun in 1921, soured and cooled as both economic and eventually political control began slipping from their grasp. They blamed this loss on liberalizing ideas from the West with the United States receiving the most blame. Ozel

characterizes the 1990s in Turkey as a series of crises within a framework of societal transformation driven by forces of reform. In the new millennium, AKP became an agent of this transformational change, but in its second term has failed to live up to its earlier promise to effectively shepherd liberalizing changes.

ROLE OF WOMEN: CRITICAL IN ISLAMIST IMAGINATION

¶4. (C) Within Islamist thought, protecting private life from infringement is a critical issue. Religions generally fight the intrusion of the state into these matters. In Turkey, women are the vital touchstone of the sanctity of the family. According to Ozel, the headscarf is a convention that permits women to venture into places, such as the classroom and workplace, otherwise forbidden. From this perspective, the headscarf is the most potent symbol of new-found freedom.

¶5. (C) But while the AKP genuinely desires the education of women, Ozel observes that it also wants women to stay at home. He is disturbed by statistics indicating the number of women in the workforce has fallen from 28 to 23 percent in the last five years, with fewer women found as employees of the state bureaucracy. When these pious women "face misogyny, they are powerless." Ozel claims there is no original thinking ongoing to address the contemporary needs and roles of women within AKP or the official religious establishment, the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet), in Turkey. Even if the AKP could enlarge the scope of women, they would not, says Ozel, which reflects the AKP problem.

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NATURAL RHYTHM OF TURKEY: WITH THE WEST

¶6. (C) While the natural rhythm of Turkey since Ataturk has been toward the West, among the secular elite, an anti-western tendency is stronger now than at any time since the founding of the republic, Ozel argues. The secular elite feel themselves in an existential struggle with those propounding democracy in Turkey. As a result, if aligning with the West means fully democratic governance, then the secular elite have no choice but to jettison the West. Tragically, while the AKP espouses democracy, the AKP's understanding of democracy is neither really liberal nor truly democratic, according to Ozel. This is all the more disheartening since the AKP effectively created space to further democratic development - in keeping with the country's westward-looking rhythm. The Prime Minister, sadly, fails to exercise the leadership needed to filter his true impulses in order to guide this transformation. The AKP has a shallow understanding of democracy; with last July's electoral success went to its head and it turned "majoritarian." It appears the AKP could not or cannot delink itself from its pious Anatolian roots. A new oligarchy now competes with an old one.

¶7. (C) One western-oriented Turk who is a lightening rod of this new competition is Kemal Dervis, who left the World Bank after 22 years to become Turkey's minister of economic affairs in 2001. He was appointed following what many consider Turkey's most severe economic crisis. Though he joined the Republican People's Party (CHP) upon resigning his ministerial post in 2002, the secular elite today believes the West sent him to "kill Turkey's secular parties," according to Ozel. This perceived life and death struggle leads directly to the secular elite's disdain for the West. (Note: Dervis established a IMF-approved macroeconomic stabilization program which entailed significant structural reforms, as well as comprehensive financial sector reforms that shielded banks from political use. He also procured \$20 billion in loans from the IMF and World Bank for Turkey; inflation running about 70 percent through the 1990s fell to 12 percent by 2003.)

BUT AVERAGE TURKS FEEL OUTSIDE HELP NECESSARY

¶ 18. (C) (The severe economic crisis of 2001 was greatly aggravated when then-PM Bulent Ecevit stormed out of an NSC meeting charging that President Sezer had leveled accusations against him using impolite language. Ozel points to this and other events to marshal his argument that Turkey is so far incapable of solving systemic obstructions to a level playing field where liberal democracy can flourish.) In the current situation, Turks intuitively understand the country needs outside help to provide structure for a fair debate. That's why support for EU membership recently shot up to 62 percent, despite the fundamental unfairness in the way the EU has handled Turkey's membership bid, per Ozel. Turkey's authoritarian tendencies short-circuit a freely competitive process. Ataturk's true ideals did not long survive him; Kemalism is not, Ozel stated, what the Turkish Republic's founder had in mind. (See reftel for comment by Erdal Inonu on Ataturk, democracy, westernization.)

¶ 19. (C) "The void created by the current U.S. administration is partially responsible for the disruption of traditional American influence," says Ozel. Ambivalence among the secular elite toward the West further weakens the U.S.' stabilizing influence on Turkey. While mindful of a danger of secularists pushing Turkey from its western orientation, he is confident they will turn back from the precipice - lacking viable alternatives - at the last moment.

¶ 10. (C) Comment. Ozel is emblematic of those who are deeply disappointed with the AKP for failing to foster a breakthrough to greater liberal democracy in Turkey. These observers placed high hopes in the AKP. Now they recognize that an imperfect AKP is not enough, but have yet to come up with a formula for how to continue to move this society forward. End comment.

WIENER